1: Junod M-5 (1895-1909)1927 Thonga

INTRODUCTION

21 In the year 1895, I had the great pleasure of receiving a visit from Lord Bryce in Lourenço Marques where I was staying at the head of the Swiss Romande Mission. This distinguished statesman, in the course of his travels through South Africa, had devoted considerable attention to the Native tribes throughout the country, endeavouring to understand them and to foresee their future. He had soon noticed however how scant is our knowledge about them, and was trying to stimulate men on the spot to undertake a scientific study of their primitive life. In the course of our conversation, I was struck by the following remark which he made to me: "How thankful should we be, we men of the XIXth century, if a Roman had taken the trouble fully to investigate the habits of our Celtic forefathers ! This work has not been done, and we shall always remain ignorant of things which would have interested us so much !"

This observation was quite a revelation to me. It was possible then, that these Natives, for whose sake we went to Africa, would themselves benefit by such a study, and that, in the course of time, they would be grateful to know what they had been, when they were still leading their savage life... This argument, in addition to so many others, had never occurred to me. Up to that date I had already collected some Ronga tales and studied some curious customs of the tribe. But the science which I was pursuing as a favourite pastime was Entomology. Delagoa Bay is a splendid place for beetles and butterflies. I had come across a wonderful forest near Morakwen where I had been fortunate enough to discover a new kind of Papilio ! Since that time Ethnography has more or less supplanted Entomology. I started on the systematic and thorough investigation which Lord Bryce recommended to me, and I very soon found out that, after all, Man is infinitely more interesting than the insect ! The material which I gathered amongst

121 the Ba-Ronga of Delagoa Bay was first published in my French book *Les Ba-Ronga* with the kind help of the Geographical Society of Neuchâtel in 1898. Since then I have pursued my studies amongst the Northern Clans of the Thongas of the Transvaal and, if I am able to undertake this publication, in which I hope to give a more complete description of the life of a South African tribe, I feel that I owe to my distinguished visitor the generating idea, the decisive impulse.

* * *

000 This was the right moment to undertake this enquiry, as the following sad experience will plainly show. Coming home in 1909, I met, on board the splendid U. C. Steamer on which we were travelling, three well known Native gentlemen who were, I think, going to England for political reasons. I had great pleasure in speaking with them. One of them was the editor of a Native paper ; another was a Christian chief, the third was at the head of a Training Institution which he had founded himself. One day I made up my mind to gather some ethnographical facts from them. They were Zulus, and I wanted to know for purposes of comparison what were the precise ideas of their tribe about witchcraft. Never in my scientific career did I meet with a more complete failure ! The editor had been born in a Wesleyan family, and never lived amongst heathen. The chief knew much more on the subject but, for some obscure reason, was not inclined to disclose his knowledge. The Principal of the Institution was a very clever man ; he first declared that witchcraft was met with amongst white people just the same as amongst South African Natives, and that it was only a form of mesmerism ; and, as he was always anxious to get more knowledge himself, he proceeded to question me about mesmerism ; the whole interview ended therefore in a lesson which I was obliged to give him on that mysterious subject, and I did not learn anything new from my three friends... I left them in quite a melancholy mood, thinking how different it was with my Thonga informants, Mboza, Tobane and even Elias !

123 In fact, the circumstances in which I found myself amongst the Thongas, were the most favourable imaginable for such an investigation. The great bulk of the tribe is still absolutely savage. We have mastered its language and can understand all they tell us. On the other hand we have founded a Church amongst them and have

126 in the book on *Les Ba-Ronga*. I have still a good many in manuscript, some of which will be found in the second volume of the present work.

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121 My aim in collecting all this material has been twofold ; scientific and practical.

Spoon-Elias
as Church elder in 1907.

First of all scientific. The life of a South African tribe is a collection of biological phenomena which must be described objectively and which are of great interest, representing, as they do, a certain stage of human development. These biological phenomena are sometimes at first of a repulsive character. The sexual life of the Bantus especially shocks our moral feelings. I did not think however that I could entirely leave out this subject in a scientific book, and the more I studied it, the more I saw that these strange rites have a much deeper meaning than at first appears, and that we could not pretend to know Natives if we remained ignorant of these facts. But while trying to give a full account, I am convinced, on the other hand, that, to be truly scientific, such a description must be limited to one well defined tribe. I go even further : all the data must be localised ; in the tribe itself there are different clans ; customs vary from one to another. It is of the greatest importance that all the facts be classed geographically. A similar work can be done later for other tribes, and it is only when a sufficient number of trustworthy monographs have been written that a comparative study on Bantu ethnography can be undertaken. The "Essential Kafir" of Dudley Kidd is very interesting and full of useful remarks, but the essential Kafir will not be known till a scientific and thorough study of all the tribes has been completed. My aim has been to submit the Thonga tribe to such a study and I shall be most gratified if it leads other observers to undertake the same investigation with regard to other African tribes.

121 Though I do not pretend to prejudge anything about any other South African tribe, it will soon be seen that many of the customs here described are spread more or less over the whole of the Sub-Continent, and that what I write about the Thongas applies more or less to the Suthos, the Zulus, even to the Nyandjas of Lake Nyassa and to tribes in Central Africa. I think therefore that the conclusions reached by this study may be of use not only to those interested in the Thonga tribe itself but to all Africanists or Bantuists.

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000 There are two classes of men to whom I should like to bring some practical help in their work: the Native Commissioners and the Missionaries.

It is absolutely necessary that Native Commissioners should have a better knowledge of the tribe which they administer in the name of civilised Governments. They are apt to make the most dangerous mistakes from mere ignorance of the true nature of rites or superstitions which they do not understand. I have heard of colonial authorities receiving witchcraft accusations, believing that the pretended wizards were real murderers and anthropophagists and condemning them as such! To govern savages, you must study them thoroughly in order both to recognise the wrong ideas against which you have to contend and to avoid hurting their feelings unnecessarily. This is imperative if you wish to win their confidence and maintain a friendly understanding between them and the alien European Government. How many Native wars might have been avoided if the Native Commissioner had had a better knowledge of Bantu ethnography, and, on the other hand, how much good has been done by those who have taken the trouble to study the Natives with sympathy in order to be just to them!

And this is equally true of Missionaries.

Missionary work is much better understood now than it was formerly. The Edinburgh Conference of 1910 proclaimed the necessity for Missionaries of a sympathetic study of Native beliefs and social customs. One of the eight Commissions which prepared that wonderful Congress devoted considerable time to this subject, and issued a remarkable report, whose conclusions are worth reading. It urges that in each field a thorough investigation be undertaken, in

1: Junod M-5 (1895-1909)1927 Thonga

000 order that the message of the Gospel may be presented in such a way as will appeal to those aspirations after the truth which reveal themselves in the religion and social rites of the Natives. How superior is this conception to that of former times, when heathenism was looked on as a creation of the devil through and through! We see better now that, amidst darkness and sin, the heathen mind is often seeking light and righteousness, and that these rays of truth, these presentiments of a higher life, must be infinitely respected and utilised in the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. For instance, see how seriously savages keep their taboo!... This taboo—as we shall see—is inspired by strange, unscientific physiological ideas regarding defilement and contagion, which will disappear when scientific knowledge has spread amongst them. But let these ideas be somewhat amended, let the Natives understand that what is taboo is not physical uncleanness but moral evil, and their strong aversion to the act tabooed may become a powerful moral impulse for good.

* * *

128 Here is the plan which I mean to adopt. After having briefly
121 explained in a preliminary chapter what the Thonga tribe is, I shall take an individual and follow him in his career from birth to death; the story of the evolution of a man and of a woman will constitute the first part of the book.

Then I shall pass on to the first social organism formed by these individuals, and study the life of the family and of the village, which is but an enlarged family.

The villages make up the clan and the tribe. The national life will constitute my third part, where I shall deal especially with the Chief, the Court and the Army.

Agricultural and industrial life and literary and artistic life will then be studied (as collective manifestations of the life of the tribe) and last but not least, I shall devote a considerable amount of time to the religious life and superstitions, trying to penetrate into the soul of the tribe, and to understand the manifold manifestations of its psychic life, which have always had a special interest for me.

128 It would have been safer for me to write this new and enlarged edition of *Les Ba-Ronga* in French, my native tongue. I decided to attempt it in English, as the public interested in South African affairs

128 is essentially an English-speaking public and as a great portion of the Thonga tribe is settled in British Territory. I know that I can rely on the indulgence of the English public... When my readers notice that the book has been written by a foreigner—I am afraid they will often make that observation—I beg them kindly to remember that, for me, it would have been much more agreeable to write it in French...

* * *

121 To work for Science is noble ; but to help our fellow men is nobler still.

In the difficult undertaking which lies before me, I shall feel immensely gratified if scientists find useful material for their studies amongst my observations. Anthropologists try to throw some light on the dark problem of the origin of the psychic life in mankind; may the picture of a South African primitive tribe bring them some valuable information. But I should feel even deeper satisfaction if my work could help my South African brethren, and contribute to the peaceful solution of our great practical problem there, the Native problem. White men soon tire of the Native when they only see the badly brought up youths who walk about the streets of our colonial towns. They despise them, find them "cheeky" and very soon come to the conclusion : "Natives are no good !" Who can deny that this attitude, adopted by so many South Africans, is as dangerous for the peace of the country as are the very defects with which they reproach the Natives, and which often come from contact with a depraved and unscupulous civilisation ? Let those who are prejudiced against the black race study more carefully its customs, its mind, such as it reveals itself in the old rites of the Bantu tribes. They will see that these Natives are much more earnest than they thought and that in them beats a true human heart. If, in their ignorance of true morality and of true religion, they have submitted themselves willingly to the sufferings of initiation, to the painful rites of purification, in order to reach what they thought to be a higher level of human righteousness, are we not entitled to hope that we shall be able to build up true character in them when we bring them under the moralising influence of Christianity, and teach them to understand the religion which has saved the world ?

Should I succeed in eliciting new and more enlightened sympathy

l: Junod M-5 (1895-1909)1927 Thonga

121 amongst the Whites for our Native brethren, should this book prevent the gulf which separates the races from becoming wider, I think it will have been worth while writing it.

May I be allowed one final comment ? Colossal changes are now taking place amongst the South African tribes. Civilisation has taken fast hold not only of the coast but of the interior. It has exercised a marvellous influence on the High Velt of Johannesburg and is spreading to the borders of the desert. Amongst those races so long stagnant, an evolution has started which is proceeding with great rapidity and a kind of fatality. What will be its ultimate result ? The ethnographer does not generally trouble himself with such questions. It is enough for him to note the facts carefully and to describe them accurately. I aim at being a faithful and impartial ethnographer in the study of customs which still exist but will soon have passed away, but I cannot forget that I am also a Missionary. I belong to that body of men who, with Native Commissioners and liberal minded Colonists, feel they have a sacred duty to perform towards the weaker race. In this most tempting basket of varied fruits which civilisation offers to the Native, we feel we must guide his inexperienced hand, pointing out to him those which conduce to his happiness and progress and those which are poisonous and might be fatal to him. This book is addressed to those who can influence this evolution, be they the Authorities puzzled by the Native problem, or be they educated Natives who 121 are perplexed regarding the future of their race. I will endeavour to 128 indicate the lines along which it appears to me we ought to direct the tribe in order that it may escape shame and destruction. But these suggestions will be given at the end of the volume, in special paragraphs, carefully separated from the scientific treatise. I have enough respect for science to avoid mixing the two subjects. On the other hand, I trust those of my readers who do not share my religious faith or my philanthropic hopes will not blame me for here touching upon the important problems of Native policy. Science has never opposed the betterment and ennoblement of humanity ! If this book can in the slightest degree help towards this end, such help will be its best and most precious justification.

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128 Since the first edition was published, I have spent seven years more in Rikatla and gathered a considerable amount of new information,

1: Junod M-5 (1895-1909)1927 Thonga

219

SECOND PART

THE LIFE OF THE FAMILY AND OF THE VILLAGE

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621 592 Having followed a man and a woman from the beginning to the end of their existence, I now come to the Life of the Family and of the Village. Both subjects are in close connexion. As a rule, a village is but a family composed of the headman, the father, his wives, his children and the old folk who depend upon him ; but in many cases his younger brothers live with him, sometimes a son-in-law, or even a stranger, and all these inmates compose the village, *muti* (1). In the first chapter we shall consider the family itself, its constitution, the system of relationship, and in the second, the village, the concrete embodiment of the family, its foundation, its main laws and the respective occupations of its members.

CHAPTER I

THE LIFE OF THE FAMILY

121 601 The kinship system of the Thongas and, I suppose, of all the Bantus is widely different from ours, and greatly surprises the

(1) Native villages are generally called *kraals* by South African colonists. This expression comes from the Portuguese word *curral* which means properly stable. I shall employ it to designate the enclosure where oxen are kept, the cattle-kraal, but it does not seem right to apply it to the *muti* which is a *village*, however small and poor it may be. The Portuguese call native villages *povoação*.

1: Junod M-5 (1895-1909)1927 Thonga

uninitiated student who tries to understand it. It is a very complicated matter indeed. In *Les Ba-Ronga* I have given the genealogy of Tobane and tried to sketch the system, and even to explain it. I cannot say that I was altogether satisfied with this first attempt. When later on I had an opportunity of studying the subject in the Northern clans, I found that a comparison between the customs of the different parts of the tribe helped greatly to an understanding of the whole matter. This led me to extend my investigation to neighbouring tribes, and, after the publication of the first edition of this book, I made inquiries amongst the Vendas, Pedi-Khahas, Suthos, Chopis, Ndjaos and Tongas. I then conceived the ambitious plan of drawing up a table of the terms of relationship in all these tribes or sub-tribes, being convinced that it would be of great interest, both from the linguistic and from the ethnographic point of view. I publish it in Appendix IV, at the end of this Volume. My chief concern remains with the Thonga tribe, but after having described in detail the kinship system amongst the Thongas, I intend to sketch some of the most characteristic customs met with amongst their fellow Bantus in South Africa.

May I add that though it is comparatively easy to discover the main ideas in relation to the family in the Thonga tribe, yet the whole tangle is extraordinarily difficult to unravel. I had believed that it was composed of two threads only, twisted together and knotted a hundred times : the lobola and polygamy customs. But I saw that many other threads were entwined with these : remnants of an ancient state of society where the mother-right prevailed, and perhaps traces of the old group-marriage system which is still extant amongst Australian natives. My aim is more modest to-day. I do not claim to explain everything, but to present a wider, more complete statement of facts, which I offer to professional anthropologists in order that they may fix the place of the present Thonga system of relationship in the evolution of the human family.

FOURTH PART

AGRICULTURAL AND INDUSTRIAL LIFE

In the first volume of this work, I have tried to give a description 121
of the Social Life of the tribe by depicting its customs in relation to the individual, communal and national life. In the second volume I shall consider its Mental and Spiritual Life, its Literature and Music, its Religion, Magic and Morality. The Agricultural and Industrial Life will afford a transition from the one to the other of these subjects; this belongs primarily to the social manifestations of the tribal life, but the imagination displayed by sculptors, weavers, potters (or rather "potteresses") brings it also into relation with the mental. I do not however pretend to draw a sharp line of distinction between these two domains, as the mental life is reflected in the social customs, and the social idea strongly dominates the mental life of the tribe.

CHAPTER I

Agricultural Life

A. THE LAND AND THE NATIVE SYSTEM OF LAND TENURE.

1. *The nature of the soil.*

Considering that the Thongas dwell in the South of Africa, a 134
part of the world which is generally rocky and sterile, Nature

p. 153

FIFTH PART

LITERARY AND ARTISTIC LIFE

Ethnography does not consist merely in the description of customs and rites. Beneath the manifold manifestations of the Life of the Tribe, the ethnographer tries to discover its soul... The further we proceed in our study, the nearer we approach to the mystery of its mental life. 121

The mental life reveals itself in two great sets of spiritual facts, those relating to the intellectual and those relating to the religious and moral side of life ; in other words, the mind of a nation may be considered under two different aspects : the intellectual, and the moral and religious. We have not yet gone far enough to come to any conclusion as regards the Religion and Morality of the Native, but we can now attempt to describe the main characteristics of the Native intellect.

CHAPTER I

Characteristics of the Bantu Intellect.

I intend to give here, briefly, the results of a study of the language, the language of a nation being one of the most trustworthy and complete manifestations of its mind. 197

I have been bold enough to speak of the *Bantu*, and not merely of the *Thonga* intellect, because the grammatical features of all

R: Junod M-5 (1895-1909) 1927 Thonga
p. 301

SIXTH PART

RELIGIOUS LIFE AND SUPERSTITIONS.

The mystery of the Psychic life! There is a mystery in any 121
form of life, be it vegetable, animal, or intellectual. But how much deeper and more difficult it is to fathom, when we are dealing with those higher manifestations of the mental life, which seem peculiar to mankind : Religion, Morality and also, besides these, Magic of all kinds, Divination, Spirit-Possession, Witchcraft, all of which we include under the term Superstition. Amongst savage peoples Religion and Magic, Morality and Taboo, are not yet clearly differentiated. I believe them to proceed from different sources ; but they are more or less confounded in the rites, and this makes them all the more difficult to understand. I do not now claim to throw a perfect light on the dim, confused notions of the Bantu soul. The race is so little philosophical that it can accept conflicting ideas to an extent which would be impossible in more rational, more intellectually developed minds. My aim is, as ever, to be as impartial as possible. I have no preconceived idea as to what primitive man was, or ought to have been. I believe the evolutionist theory to be supported by a great number of probabilities and to be the best solution of many problems. Yet I think it to be merely a hypothesis, and that it would be unscientific to regard it as a dogma to the strengthening of which Science must devote all its labours. I may endeavour to reach some conclusions at the end of this VIth Part ; but my intention is to treat this subject by giving a faithful record of my own observations : professional anthropologists, or historians of Religion can do what they like with this material ; my only ambition is that it should be entirely reliable.

2: Junod M-5 (1895-1909) 1927 Thonga
p 622

CONCLUSION

121 114 174

I have reached the end of my study of the Life of a South African tribe in its principal manifestations, social, mental and spiritual. In order to write a complete anthropological monograph, I ought to have also dealt at length with the physical features of the Thongas. This would have led me too far. However I have taken a few anthropometric measurements, which have been published in the *Bulletin de la Société neuchâteloise de Géographie* of 1917, together with an explanation kindly written by Dr. E. Pittard of Geneva, whose competency in this domain is well-known. I now come to my conclusion. The aim of this book being twofold, scientific and practical, I shall try in these final pages to answer two great questions, one appertaining to Science: How far can the present-day South Africans be described as Primitives? the other, of greater practical importance: How far can the South African tribe withstand the new condition of things brought about by twentieth-century civilisation?